DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 033 444 EA 002 527

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TITLE Middle School--Promise of the Future.
Pub Date 13 Mar 69
Note 9p.; Paper presented at Southeast Missouri State College (March 13, 1969).

EDRS Price EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.55
Descriptors Activities, *Curriculum Design, Educational Environment, *Educational Innovation, Emotional Development, Grouping (Instructional Purposes), Growth Patterns, Guidance Programs, Junior High Schools, Maturation, *Middle Schools, *Program Development, Self Expression, Social Development

Abstract

There is a growing body of evidence that a separate maturation level exists for youngsters in the middle school years. Research data indicate that middle school youth possess similar physical, social, mental, and emotional characteristics. A creative development of middle school programs is clearly needed. Various facets of middle school programs are outlined. (1) The environment ought to be a dynamic and active school in which youngsters may pursue learning free of unnecessary restraint. (2) A revitalized curriculum would include three elements: analytical, personal dynamics, and expressive arts. (3) Student grouping should reflect the rate of mental, physical, social, and emotional growth. (4) Activity programs which enable boys and girls to participate both separately and collectively are successful. (5) Flexibility in scheduling can facilitate learning. (6) Guidance patterns should involve the use of all staff in counseling activities. Related documents are EA 002 528 and EA 002 642. (Author/MF)

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Middle School - Promise of the Future

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The middle school is rapidly emerging in American education full of promise and hope. Educators and laymen are showing considerable interest in its structural potential for the improvement of educational processes for youngsters in the years 11 to 14.

The dimension of the reorganized middle school is best defined by Alexander[1] who states, "The emergent middle school may best be thought of as a phase and program bridging but differing from the childhood and adolescent phases and programs." Thus the middle school is an organization designed for youth between the years of the elementary school and those of the high school. Significantly, it is considered a distinct level of schooling rather than an adjunct to the secondary or elementary levels. Herein lies its impact. Being a separate entity creates considerable avenue for the improvement of learning.

In a fundamental sense, the middle school is not a new concept. The junior high school came into existence at the turn of the twentieth century with similar ideals. Throughout the early stages of the junior high school movement, the need for a transitional organization was stated. Unfortunately, the junior high school in practice patterned itself after the senior high school model and, therefore, never reached the worthy goals for which it was clearly intended.

Based on the experience of junior high education, some educators have questioned the validity of a transitional organization. They question if there is a need for an organization which differs from the elementary and high school levels. This writer strongly takes issue with this position. American education has in this century consistently organized on the basis of maturation levels. The elementary school is

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[1] William Alexander et.al., The Emergent Middle School (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 5.

developed for the child; the high school is designed for the adolescent; the college reflects the nature of the young adult.

The burden of proof, however, lies with middle school advocates who must present argument validating the basic premise that a separate maturational level exists for youngsters in the middle school years. There is a growing body of evidence which clearly confirms this point of view. Research data indicates that middle school youth possess similar physical, social, mental, and emotional characteristics.

The period between childhood and adolescence may be defined as the period of transescence. Transescence is the stage of development which begins prior to the onset of puberty and extends through the early stages of adolescence. Since puberty does not occur for all precisely at the same chronological age in human development, the transescent designation is based on the many physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes in body chemistry that appear prior to the puberty cycle to the time in which the body gains a practical degree of stabilization over these complex changes.

Physically,the elementary youngster moves from a stage of sexual impotency to the point in adolescence of complete sexual potential. Mentally, stage level psychologists indicate that children move from an operations stage in which intellectual processes center on the concrete to an adolescent stage of formal operations which provides the person with the mental capability to think in the abstract. Socially, the youngster develops from a point of dependency on the family for values and security to a point in adolescence in which he finds a comparable dependency in the peer group.

While time could be devoted to an exhaustive substantiation of this position, it is more vital to elaborate on the potential which this knowledge provides for the future of the middle school organization. Educators faced with the task of developing programs for the transitional school now have the opportunity for rapid

and considerable progress. The middle school as it emerges is free to shape its destiny.

What is clearly needed at this point is the creative development of programs for the transescent. Middle school leaders have attacked former programs for this age such as departmentalization, high school type schedules, inflexible student groupings, improper guidance approaches, boy-girl dances, interscholastic athletics, and staffing composed of secondary teachers. In many instances, this has left a situation in which programs are barren, non existent, or in other cases simply a reversion to former activities. There does not appear to be any widespread movement to create new programs designed for the obvious needs and characteristics of the transescent.

In this context, various facets of middle school programs will be outlined.

Environment

Transescents require a flexible school climate. There should be an attitude among staff that permits youngsters considerable freedom of action. This position does not suggest chaos or an attitude of "let the youngsters do as they please," it simply means that the rigid autocratic environment in most schools deters learning. The middle school ought to be a dynamic and active school in which youngsters may pursue learning free of unnecessary restraint. The "open space" concept now prevalent in architecture provides for such interaction; however, a number of middle schools have similar involvement in more traditional buildings. It is much more of an attitude than it is "bricks and mortar." As previously stated, this is an age of dependence developing toward independence. Transescents need to begin to act on their own with as much adult help as may be required. One middle school in Upper St. Clair, Pennsylvania accomplishes this with student-faculty committees in which students design programs with faculty assistance.

Curriculum

Most of the pioneering middle schools which have developed in the early sixties

have concentrated their efforts in improving social and emotional programs. To date, very little effort has been extended in the direction of curriculum. There now appears considerable stirring among educators in an effort to direct attention to this basic need. This is proving necessary to some degree because of the emergence of a new organization. Also, curriculum revision is being prompted by the many new developments in structural knowledge as well as understandings now established concerning youth itself.

Present factors suggest at least three facets of a revitalized curriculum. These include the following components:

1. Analytical
2. Personal Dynamics
3. Expressive Arts

Analytical

The analytical component consists of those areas which are highly cognitive such as mathematics, science, and language. These subjects are usually sequential in nature and have qualities which permit considerable individualization.

There is a vital need in our country for the development of expertise in these areas. As has been indicated by numerous educators and laymen, our continued national existence depends in large measure on the ability of schools to teach effectively these fundamentals.

Personal Dynamics

The personal dynamics component is an important phase of transescent schooling. Characteristic of this stage of development is a deep need for youngsters to understand personal development. There are occurring in their lives physical changes which lead to social and emotional ramifications. The girl who begins her menstrual cycle has one set of circumstances to meet. The girl who does not have this development is presented with a different set of conditions. In both cases, there is a

clear need for understanding and the curriculum must respond to this need. A program of growth and development instruction can provide immeasurable assistance in this regard.

Another point for curriculum consideration is in the area of social interaction or social dynamics as it is here identified. Piaget has indicated that youngsters as they enter a new stage of mental development acquire a condition of disorientation. This is quite evident in transescence and a curriculum ought to provide for gainful social interaction.

Physical activities are greatly needed at this age and from a vital part of the dynamics component. All youngsters need active physical involvement which results in a successful level of physical efficiency. Boys, particularly in our culture, strive for self recognition in physical endeavors.

Self-Expression

A third curriculum component is self-expression. Cultural studies, fine arts, practical arts, creative expression, and performing arts provide the staff with unique opportunities for divergent mental development among transescents. Significantly, we have viewed these subjects more in terms of developing skills than in terms of creative expression or the understanding of others through creative expression. Understanding of man and the relationships between men can best be accomplished through identification of oneself with the basic tenets of cultures past and present. It is in this perspective that the self-expression component is most effective.

Considerable discussion has occurred concerning the approach by staff to content learning. Educators have argued that a "core" approach with its integration of content is the most logical approach. Other scholars have promoted the "inter discipline" approach in which teaching specialists are integrated rather than content. The curriculum model suggested would employ both philosophies with varying degrees of emphasis. The analytical component would emphasize an inter discipline approach with

cooperative planning in order to effect integration of content. The personal dynamics and self-expression components emphasizes core curricular approaches with teacher specialization to the degree necessary.

Student Grouping

Most approaches to the grouping of youngsters for instruction center on cognitive criteria. Such factors as intelligence, achievement levels, and aptitude are employed almost exclusively. It is incredible that many educators promote middle school education on the premise that at this level physical, social, and emotional learnings are essential while at the same time excluding these factors in a grouping formula. If the middle school is to succeed, attention must be directed at the total characteristics of transescents. In effect, there are two separate but related dimensions involved in student grouping. One facet involves the rate of student growth mentally; the other facet involves the rate of student growth physically, socially, and emotionally. The following matrix illustrates this dual approach to grouping. The matrix is suggested for a school of 600 students - 120 students per learning unit.

	Learning Unit I	Learning Unit II	Learning Unit III	Learning Unit IV	Learning Unit V	
J					30	J
I				30	60	I
H			30	60	30	H
G		30	60	30		G
F	60	60	30			F
E	30	30				E
D	30					D

In this matrix youngsters are grouped vertically according to mental achievement levels ranging from approximately fourth level through tenth level. The horizontal axis provides a means of grouping for physical, social, and emotional maturation. For example, a youngster who is achieving at the sixth level but is immature physically, socially, and emotionally would be placed in Unit I; a student achieving at the sixth achievement level and who possesses average maturity would be placed in Unit II; a mature transescent achieving at the sixth level would be placed in Unit III. Thus, rate of mental achievement can be handled by a continuous progress vertical ascent; similarly, rate of physical social, and emotional maturation can be accomplished by horizontal movement.

This grouping procedure is intended to alleviate the complex problems created by maturation at the middle school age.

Activity Programs

Research data provided by social psychologists suggest that boys and girls at the middle school level are mostly content to stay in a same sex pattern. There is a growing need at this time, however, for some involvement socially with the opposite sex. Activities which enable boys and girls to participate both separately and collectively usually are highly successful. Conversely, activities such as boy-girl dances which force integration of sexes usually are not successful.

Emerging social programs, which provide a "party" atmosphere in which group rather than individual participation takes place seem to be quite successful.

Activity programs involving pressure create a dilemma. On one hand, transescents need and can successfully adjust to normal pressures. On the other hand, abnormal pressure as it commonly exists in activities such as interscholastic athletics, contests, and performing groups may be damaging and should be restricted to those transescents who are exceptionally mature. One might postulate in this regard that pressure from within the youngster is usually advantageous while excessive

external pressure is often detrimental.

Scheduling

Scheduling should facilitate learning not deter it. Traditional secondary schedules based on time rather than a performance criteria are inappropriate. The nature of transescence indicates the need for flexibility which can best be accomplished by scheduling blocks of time for each curriculum component. In this way, teachers can effectively gauge the learning episode in relation to the current needs of students; likewise, learning activities can be carried out in varying group sizes depending on curricular objectives. Flexible group arrangements provide unlimited potential in the necessary tasks of clarifying and solidifying student learning. Such approaches also enable the staff to help youngsters acquire self direction which is particularly important as transescents begin to develop independence.

Guidance

Former patterns of guidance which greatly depended upon a guidance counselor are not as effective as the employment of all staff in counseling activities. The nature of the transescent demands immediate counseling when problems arise. Thus the total middle school environment must be designed as one which facilitates adjustment. Of course, the counselor's role is still a vital one but his efforts must be directed at assisting the instructional staff rather than being "the specialist" to whom is delegated the immense task of transescent development. A middle school that programs to meet the needs of youngsters is in all ways a guidance school.

The promise of the middle school lies in its potential. It presents the educator with immense possibilities for the creation of dynamic programs suitable for this unique age. If educators are content merely to apply the inadequate approaches of the past, middle schools will simply go the same route of past organizations. If, however, educators are prepared to study the characteristics and needs of the transescent and initiate an imaginative approach to program development, the promise of the future for middle school education can be fulfilled.